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# Wendy's Story in J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan

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## Introduction

*Peter Pan*, it seems, will never die. Although first performed over a century ago, the past decade alone has seen myriad adaptations of the story: a television show, a prequel film, a Broadway show, and a televised musical make up only a few of the most recent and notable versions of Neverland. The essential elements of Peter and Wendy's story remain much the same in these adaptations. There are always pirates and swordfights, and someone always flies, but audiences continue to follow the story despite these constant similarities. Since its 1911 publication, the novelized version of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, originally titled *Peter and Wendy*, has been adapted countless times. In fact, the novel itself is an adaptation. Barrie first penned the story as a play, which premiered in 1904 at London's Duke of York Theatre, with the script left unpublished until 1928. One 1904 reviewer called the story "absolutely original—the product of a unique imagination" ("From the Archive"), and in doing so articulated the public's continued attitude toward the story over the next one hundred years, although contemporary professional productions of the original play are somewhat rare. As Donna R. White and C. Anita Tarr observe, "There is no definitive text of *Peter Pan*, but there *is* a textual history" (viii). Therefore, it can be difficult to understand the book as an original product because of its many adaptations. Today, Barrie's novel is considered a children's classic. It consistently appears on lists with titles such as "The 20 greatest children's books ever" (Everett), and any child familiar with Walt Disney Studios has seen Peter's fairy companion Tinker Bell, who flies over Cinderella's castle before the start of every Disney film. In many ways, a study of *Peter Pan*'s popularity is simply an admission of Disney's marketing genius. Still, Peter appears in countless corners of contemporary Western culture; his name appears on everything from peanut butter packages to shirt collars to bus companies' logos. The name "Peter Pan" is synonymous with perpetual youth,

and modern popular culture celebrates him as one of children's literature's most timeless and beloved characters. But where is Wendy in all this? Despite her partnership in Peter's narrative, she has no statues, logos, or, apparently, marketing pull. Next to Peter, Wendy is often forgotten.

If we forget Wendy, however, *Peter Pan*'s modern audience ignores the story's roots. Barrie's novel begins with the famous sentence, "All children, except one, must grow up" (7), and although this exception is clearly meant to be Peter, his name is not even mentioned until later in the chapter. In the novel, Wendy has a life before Peter, and after him she will have another. In order to see Peter properly, Wendy must establish herself as a lens; without Wendy, Peter is invisible and unattainable. She both grounds him in reality *and* gives him his extraordinary qualities. In *Peter Pan*'s first chapter, instead of a description of Neverland, readers find Wendy's mother's wish that her daughter remain young forever (Barrie 7). Because Wendy cannot, and all children "soon know that they will grow up" (Barrie 7), Wendy establishes herself as the novel's protagonist from its first page.

Despite this indication of her ownership of *Peter Pan*, critics often examine Wendy as part of a group, rather than as an individual. Most often associated with Tiger Lily and Tinker Bell, Wendy becomes part of the oppressed women of Neverland rather than a single child struggling with deeply personal desires. Grouping Wendy with these other female characters simplifies her story and undermines her internal struggles. If one is to view Wendy as any sort of feminist character, as critics do attempt, one must first be willing to examine her as an individual. In this paper, I am far more interested in Wendy's personhood than her oppression. Wendy's individuality and agency stem from her unique, personal relationships with Neverland and her story itself. The reader sees both Peter and Neverland through her eyes, even as the presence of an opinionated narrator distances this view. The novelized Wendy occupies an even more

important role than her dramatic counterpart. In the play, Wendy appears onstage only after her younger brother, Michael, begins to throw a tantrum. Wendy plays a game of pretend adulthood with her brother, John. Her first line is “Now let us pretend we have a baby” (*Peter Pan*; *or*) and therefore her intentions are immediately clear: one day, she will grow up and be a mother. Although the play’s Wendy is still very much the audience’s guide to Neverland, the novel’s form provides a more complete medium for analyzing her character. The novel’s Wendy begins her story a child and ends it a mother. Barrie’s 1904 play does not end so neatly; its final scene takes place in Neverland, and emphasizes the bliss of Peter’s eternal youth far more than the complications of Wendy’s inevitable growth. Through Wendy, however, we realize that *Peter Pan* is not a story about eternal youth. It is a story about growing up, and in particular about one young girl’s realization that reality is more satisfying than make-believe. If Barrie’s play is “a new invention, always unforeseen and almost always delightful” (“From the Archive”), then it is a prototype for his novel, which draws apart from that spectacle to favor introspection.

The Wendy this essay discusses, then, will largely be the Wendy of Barrie’s 1911 novel. This Wendy is the catalyst for change in Peter’s otherwise cyclical story, but she is more than mere plot device. So often in contemporary iterations of *Peter Pan*, all one sees of Wendy is a simplified version of her most motherly self. Instead of complex and nuanced as the novel suggests, she becomes a reductive embodiment of her “Your Mother and Mine” lullaby in the Disney film, in which she coos and rocks the Lost Boys to bed after their long day of adventures. The scene could lull even the most attentive children to sleep. Barrie’s Wendy interests me far more; she is a character so at odds with her surroundings but so determined to thrive in them that the author himself suggests “she would have bored her way [into the story] whether we wanted her or not” (Barrie, *Peter Pan*, *or*). This admission implies a resignation to Wendy’s presence, as though

Barrie himself feels it necessary to admit her importance even as he struggles against her presence. The narrator also qualifies many of Wendy's actions, but she pushes back against the notion that being "only a girl" (Barrie 95) somehow makes her less worthy of adventure in Neverland. Girls, Peter says, "are much too clever to fall out of their prams" (Barrie 44) and be sent to Neverland. When Wendy convinces Peter to *bring* her to the island, she subverts the Boys' Club narrative surrounding Peter and the Lost Boys. When she decides to leave Neverland, she rails against the temptation of the island itself, choosing memory and age over forgetfulness and youth. *Peter Pan* is both an adventure for children and an adult exercise in the dangers of nostalgia, and the only character to inhabit both worlds through the course of the text is Wendy Darling. *Peter Pan* is Wendy's story.

### **The Narrator's Wendy**

If the relationship between a novel's author and reader is a kind of communion, then its narrator is a kind of priest. A narrator distils the author's vision in order to present it in pieces suitable for reader consumption, and depending on the state of the narrator, may twist the author's unbiased plot into something more partial. There are, of course, many types of narrators just as there are many types of people and many types of stories. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth elaborates on this concept, distinguishing between the "dramatized and undramatized narrator" and "the overseer and the narrator-agent" while elaborating on the varying amount of distance a narrator may have from plot. A narrator may function as either an outsider or a piece of the story itself. No matter where the narrator resides, however, he or she manipulates a readers' perspective of the story. Even though they are often ignored, narrators can and often do affect change in stories' plot and tone. Of particular interest when examining J.M.

Barrie's *Peter Pan* is the dramatized narrator. This type of narrator is a character unto himself (and in the case of Barrie's text, that character's camaraderie with Peter means the narrator is very much a "he"), and as Booth says, "never explicitly labeled as narrators at all. In a sense, every speech, every gesture, narrates" (Booth 152). Examining Barrie's narrator means examining distance as well, which, as Booth explains, can be either physical or moral, and can be measured by the author or the characters (Booth 156). In *Peter Pan*'s case, where the narrator serves as what Booth coins an "implied author," the divide occurs most significantly between narrator and characters; Barrie's narrator goes so far as to pass moral judgment on characters whom he admits to not knowing personally. This narrative stance thereby distances reader and story. In order to understand *Peter Pan*'s characters on a personal level, readers must be willing to parse through the narrator's judgmental outside commentary. This sort of character-narrator implies an "authorial silence" (Booth 272) where author and reader do not directly communicate. Instead, the reader is left to trust the narrator's unstable interpretation of the story, just as the churchgoer is left to trust the priest's.

The contrast to this character-narrator is an impartial narrator, whom Booth says fades away to allow characters to control their own stories (273-274). Emotional distance is important in maintaining an illusion of a narrator's neutrality, and controlling this means "granting or withholding the privilege of being the central observer" (Booth 284), a path which Barrie's narrator refuses to take. The narrator of *Peter Pan* makes his personal thoughts and opinions explicit, all without ever inviting the reader to disagree, though he may occasionally remind them that the story he tells is not his own. In Barrie's novel the narrator is a separate character entirely, one with no stake in the story, but plenty of thoughts about it nonetheless. He alerts readers to his influence on the story by picking

which scenes to share with them, as in this passage from Chapter Seven of Barrie's text:

The difficulty is which one to choose. Should we take the brush with the redskins at Slightly Gulch...

The extraordinary upshot of this adventure was—but we have not decided yet that this is the adventure we are to narrate. Perhaps a better one would be the night attack by the redskins on the house under the ground, when several of them stuck in the hollow trees and had to be pulled out like corks. Or we might tell how Peter saved Tiger Lily's life in the Mermaids' Lagoon, and so made her his ally.

Or we could tell of that cake the pirates cooked so that the boys might eat it and perish; and how they placed it in one cunning spot after another; but always Wendy snatched it from the hands of her children...

Which of these adventures shall we choose? The best way will be to toss for it.

I have tossed, and the lagoon has won. This almost makes one wish that the gulch or the cake or Tink's leaf had won. Of course I could do it again, and make it best out of three; however, perhaps fairest to stick to the lagoon. (Barrie 111-113)

In this passage, the narrator shifts between feigned impartiality—he offers to “toss for it,” playing fair—and blatant favoritism when he finally decides to “stick to the lagoon,” despite the fairness in tossing again. After all, there are more than two possible stories to tell. Readers must trust he actually tosses to determine which story to share, rather than picking one that interests him and playing his audience for fools. Indeed, the idea of an impartial narrator seems never to have occurred to J.M. Barrie at all. Barrie's narrator admits, “To describe [all the adventures] would require a book as large as an English-Latin, Latin-English Dictionary, and the most we can do is give one as a specimen of an hour” (Barrie

111), and so teases his audience with sound bites of other stories they will never hear. There is a self-consciousness about his narrating duties. He both dictates and commentates, and yet also acts as the authority in the decision-making process. At the same time, he plays victim to the whims of chance despite the fact that any reader with an ounce of critical thinking ability can see through his lie. It is a brilliant strategy, yet it is also manipulative and infuriating. In *Peter Pan*, the narrator provides his opinions like interjections, judging everything from Mrs. Darling's smile to Peter's belief in the pretend. He insists, as in the passage above, he knows both the best story to tell and the best way to tell it. Nothing and no one in the text, however, is judged quite as much as Wendy. The narrator labels her everything from "tidy" to "cheap," and cannot seem to decide if he would rather the reader admonish or admire her. Wendy is, to the narrator, little more than an irritating know-it-all "exulting in [Peter's] ignorance" (Barrie 39), someone with opinions too big for her brain; he sees her as a commodity to the story, if also a necessary evil. He does introduce her first, after all. Wendy Darling's entrance into the world of adults is also the reader's entrance into the world of *Peter Pan*, and so as much as the narrator may resent her for her stubbornness and strength, he is forced to admit that without her, there would be no story.

*Peter Pan*'s narrator does not tell the novel's story as it happens. He is an outsider, relaying the tale to his audience as though it happened a long time ago, though in reality its events are quite recent. He purposely distances himself from the story and in doing so hopes it allows him the right to judge it. Controversial descriptions can be swept away by the qualification that he was not actually present the night these events take place; he is only the messenger, and the readers mustn't harm him. He establishes the excuse from the end of chapter one, in which he explains, "If you or I or Wendy had been there" (Barrie 20) in describing Mrs. Darling's first encounter with Peter. Where does the narrator get



any of this information? His omniscience obtrudes, placing all his bias on Wendy and her obsession with perfection. Calling Wendy, “a tidy child” (Barrie 16) and “always glad to be of service” (Barrie 28), he wants readers to chuckle at her well-meaning antics, particularly when they cause other characters distress. When Wendy rushes off to collect her father’s medicine (Barrie 28), for example, the narrator wants the reader to both sympathize with Wendy’s ignorance and mock her for it. His tone condescends in the same way many adults’ do to children and, in fact, the way many men do to women. In many ways, Wendy embodies the popular and regressive stereotype of the icy female CEO. She knows what she wants and she hunts for it (albeit perhaps more innocently than a modern character such as, say, *The Devil Wears Prada*’s Miranda Priestly), and rather than celebrate her assertiveness, the men in her life—including the narrator of her story—attempt to undercut her. When she finds her father’s medicine at the beginning of the story, Mr. Darling thanks her with “a vindictive politeness that was quite thrown away upon her” (Barrie 29). She becomes a joke between both the adults in the room and the narrator and his readers. In chuckling at Wendy here, readers sink to the narrator’s level; they see Wendy as he spitefully paints her, rather than as she earnestly presents herself. When Wendy tells Peter and the Lost Boys about her wish to go home, the boys threaten to “chain her up” and “keep her prisoner” as their mother (Barrie 155). As Emily Clark argues, “Peter... simply requires a mother and a housekeeper more than he requires the Lost Boys” (305). In the most grotesque instance of this mockery, near the end of the book, the pirate Smee binds Wendy to the ship’s mast and says, “See here, honey...I’ll save you if you promise to be my mother” (Barrie 191). The narrator pigeonholes her, serving up genuine praise of her spirit alongside a condescending catalogue of her bossiest and most unladylike moments. The clearest example of this occurs when Captain Hook holds Wendy and the Lost Boys prisoner on his ship:

No words of mine can tell you how Wendy despised those pirates. To the boys there was at least some glamour in the pirate calling, but all that she saw was that the ship had not been scrubbed for years. There was not a port-hole on the grimy glass of which you might not have written with your finger, "Dirty Pig," and she had already written it on several. But as the boys gathered round her she had no thought, of course, save for them. (Barrie 190-191)

Initially the narrator acknowledges Wendy's bravery, or at least attempts it. She "despised those pirates" (Barrie 190). This implies disgust and a visceral response to both her captors and her situation. The following sentences undercut this sentiment, however, and shove her back into the neat girlish box the narrator so gleefully provides. He insists readers focus on how "all she saw was that the ship had not been scrubbed for years" rather than her bravery or even disgust at the pirates themselves. The narrator's qualification of the boys' seeing "at least some glamour in the pirate calling" indicates readers are meant to identify with them. If they too think piracy sounds exciting, it's alright; the Lost Boys agree. Wendy, by contrast, is labeled haughty for thinking herself above such temptations, rather than brave. Any time Wendy hints at something revolutionary or even modern, the narrator denies her. Rather than let readers celebrate Wendy's ability to resist the "glamour in the pirate calling" (Barrie 190), the narrator insists they chuckle at her. As the narrator watches Wendy with one brow always raised, a smirk tugging his lips, he encourages readers to join him.

The narrator wants Wendy to fail. If she cannot get what she wants—a solidly grown-up life colored with childhood memories—then her letdown will validate his own petulant attitude, which he reveals when watching Mrs. Darling through the nursery window. In the middle of mocking Mrs. Darling, the narrator explains, "Nobody really wants us. So let us watch and say jaggy things, in the hope that some of them will hurt" (Barrie 216). The narrator needs Wendy to slip

up in the same way Hook needs Peter to succumb to cheating. The “jaggy things” must become valid. In calling Wendy “rather cheap” when she looks for a kiss from Peter (Barrie 41), he hopes such description will stick with the reader for the rest of the novel. The narrator cannot simply let Wendy or the other children enjoy their story; instead, he qualifies most of what they say and do. As an adult watching a child consumed by her own vivacity, the narrator envies Wendy. He calls children “the most heartless things in the world...but so attractive” (Barrie 152), referring not to their physical beauty but to their charming selfishness and their unknown power over the adult world. To the narrator, children are attractive because they are cruel and oblivious to their cruelty. Although the narrator’s tone toward Wendy—and indeed children as a whole—may be more forgiving than Hook’s attitude toward Peter (at the very least, the narrator does not celebrate the idea of adults murdering any of the children), in many ways he still treats her like a trinket. The narrator cannot even muster the courage to hate Wendy; instead he envies her and masks it as pity. At the end of the novel, he describes Wendy as “the kind that likes to grow up” (Barrie 234), attempting to build a kind of camaraderie between them despite his mockery of her youth. Her aging happily *should* be a good thing, but in the narrator’s voice is snarky and mean. When Wendy grows up to become a true lady, the narrator accepts her, never mind that the moment Peter re-enters the nursery she is found “squeezing herself as small as possible” (Barrie 238), trying to force herself back into a childhood she never fit comfortably anyhow. While Wendy has strength and passion and an imagination she carries into adulthood, all the narrator has is a story that does not belong to him. Barrie could have chosen to frame *Peter Pan* through Wendy’s eyes, and in many ways doing so would have made sense: she bridges London and Neverland, reality and fantasy. The character narrator distances readers from childhood itself, forcing them to reckon with the inevitability of their own age, and his commentary makes Peter more exotic and Wendy more familiar.

If Peter is adventure, then Wendy is stability, the sensible glue holding all his looseness together. The choice to make the narrator an outsider is a conscious one; it automatically places a screen between reader and character, distorting Wendy by virtue of the narrator's own biased assumptions and storytelling choices. After all, there are whole adventures cut from the story in which Wendy is the hero. The narrator admits she saves the Lost Boys from drowning more than once (Barrie 112). The narrator would rather endlessly praise Peter than highlight Wendy's own brand of bravery. Hers is quieter and far less showy; because she does not crow at her own cleverness, the narrator deems her less interesting. So does Peter. As a result, Wendy risks unintentional regression into the "icy bitch queen" stereotype; she limits her credibility in the boys' world of Neverland. As Clark argues, Peter wants a "housekeeper," not a companion or a friend (305). Reducing Wendy to this stereotype, however, undermines how "She views her domestic accomplishments as a sign of both maturity and empowerment, not as an indicator of Peter's male superiority" (Clark 305). One might argue that Peter forces Wendy into the domestic sphere because he cannot fathom women existing elsewhere, although this argument crumbles the moment one remembers ambitious Tinker Bell or strong Tiger Lily. Wendy's genuine pride in her maternal nature challenges any implication that Peter forces her into her position. She enjoys exactly the role Peter lays out for her, and yet both Peter and the narrator still mock her for it. The "only a girl" (Barrie 95) narrative means that no matter what Wendy does, someone will qualify her actions. With every decision she makes, and in particular every domestic decision, Wendy risks an accidental fall.

The narrator battles against Wendy's position as a heroine because reading her as a bore persuasively simplifies his story. Admiring Peter is easy, but liking Wendy takes a willingness to ask real questions even when the flashier Peter advertises the fun of make-believe. When the children first arrive in the

Neverland, Peter asks them, “Do you want an adventure now...or would you like to have your tea first?” (Barrie 63). Wendy replies, “tea first” and the reader’s instinct is to laugh at her, particularly when her brother John is described as “braver” than she in the same sentence (Barrie 63). Shortly after this, the narrator concedes her hesitation may have been valid; pirates fire a cannon at the children and “the terrified three learn the difference between an island of make-believe and the same island come true” (Barrie 68). The sentiment can be applied to Peter as well, although the narrator’s constant praise of him makes this reading less obvious. Almost every compliment to Peter accompanies an insult to Wendy. For instance, the narrator balances mockery and praise during the pair’s first meeting, immediately after Wendy “got out her housewife, and sewed the shadow on to Peter’s foot” (Barrie 39). Peter leaps into the air and praises himself without giving Wendy so much as a glance, and this rudeness perfectly sums up the irritating charm of his character. The narrator, rather than condemn Peter as he does other characters such as Mr. Darling, instead laughs the whole thing off by saying, “It is humiliating to have to confess that this conceit of Peter was one of his most fascinating qualities” (Barrie 39). By admitting his humiliation at liking this quality of Peter’s, the narrator praises Peter’s actions and celebrates his own sensible, adult authority.

Suddenly Peter is no longer rude, but quirky and fun and “fascinating.” While domestic descriptions such as “courteously,” “dignified,” and “stay-at-home” surround Wendy, Peter is described as “ignorant,” “rapturous,” and “delightful.” While Peter knows little about Wendy’s world of custom and courtesy, he knows plenty about fantasy. The fanciful bores both him and the narrator. When Peter tells Wendy about the origin of fairies, the narrator describes it as “tedious talk,” directly undermining the whimsical explanation that “when the first baby laughed for the first time, its laugh broke into a thousand pieces and they all went skipping about, and that was the beginning of fairies” (Barrie 42).

From the moment of his introduction, Peter appears unlike any other child in the book, and certainly unlike any child Wendy knows. His blasé attitude toward the impossible is part of what draws her to him, and her fascination with his normal is what irritates Peter the most. Perhaps he has a good reason for treating Wendy so poorly. When Wendy, offended by Peter's cockiness, springs back into bed and burrows under the covers, Peter coaxes her out with flattery. In regards to her response, the narrator describes Wendy as "every inch a woman, though there were not very many inches, and she peeped out of the bed-clothes...and she sat with him on the side of the bed" (Barrie 40). The narrator implies this response is natural and the only possible option, seeing as "no woman has ever yet been able to resist" Peter's voice (Barrie 40). With this description the narrator implicates Wendy as passive and malleable to Peter's clever flattery. To the narrator, Wendy is not fascinating. She is not merry or brave or courageous. She is prim and neat and stubborn: all qualities the narrator views as sweet, but ultimately stuffy and prim. The narrator fully acknowledges the restrictive nature of Wendy's position, but refuses to allow or even encourage her to escape it. He views Wendy the same way Peter does; she entertains him as a necessary-if-boring and girlish piece of a far more exciting and boyish story. In painting her this way, he forgets to highlight her agency in more than a few small asides. These asides transform Wendy from passive participant to active storyteller.

In the same chapter that Wendy fixes Peter's shadow, Peter invites her to Neverland. Modern retellings cast Peter as the tempter, whisking children away to Neverland for his enjoyment alone. However, the novel's narrator outlines Peter's temptation with an almost clinical precision. After Peter mentions his love of Wendy's stories and before he wakes her brothers, the idea of a journey to Neverland emerges:

"Don't go Peter," she entreated, "I know such lots of stories."

Those were her precise words, so there can be no denying that it was she who first tempted him.

He came back, and there was a greedy look in his eyes now which ought to have alarmed her, but did not.

“Oh, the stories I could tell to the boys!” she cried, and then Peter gripped her and began to draw her toward the window.

“Let me go!” she ordered him.

“Wendy, do come with me and tell the other boys.”

Of course she was very pleased to be asked... (Barrie 47-48)

Of particular interest here is the narrator's insistence that “these were her precise words,” that Wendy tempts Peter first. Shortly before this, the narrator admits to having witnessed none of these events, to having not been present for this story at all. By alerting readers to his manipulative nature, he creates a dangerously false ethos. In the above passage, the narrator paints Peter as blameless, but in attempting to shame Wendy, inadvertently lifts her up. This passage shifts Wendy's position from temptress to authority and thereby solidifies her as not only a character in this story, but also an influence. Although Wendy does not fight nor fly as often as Peter, she maintains authority over not only her own story, but also those of the book's other children. Wendy's agency manifests a tad unconventionally, but it exists even more concretely than Peter's. No “riddle of being” binds Wendy and no boys tempt her to danger. The narrator's presentation of her makes her journey difficult, but she does not bow to his insults or unflattering descriptions. Instead, she moves forward, writing the story she wants to read rather than the one outlined by anyone else.

## Wendy's Agency

Barrie undercuts Wendy's agency further in his 1928 dedication to the printed version of the play. In it, he writes, "It may be that even Peter did not really bring her to the Never Land of his free will, but merely pretended to do so because she would not stay away" (Barrie, *Peter Pan, or*), and although his dedication may come from Barrie's play rather than his novel, the play's later publication date implies the novelized Wendy full formation in Barrie's mind. In this dedication, Barrie confirms Wendy's continuing influence on the development of the story. Barrie indicates, "Perhaps she would have bored her way in at last whether we wanted her or not" (Barrie, *Peter Pan, or*), coloring Wendy not only as a character beyond his control, but also a potentially unwanted one. Although Wendy was not part of the original story, she appears everywhere in its novelized form from first to last page. Although her presence may wear at him, Wendy's stubbornness impresses Barrie, and therefore ought to impress the reader as well. By highlighting Wendy's determination to get to Neverland, Barrie also implicitly mentions her desire to leave; if Wendy arrives in Neverland despite others' wishes against it, logic holds she will leave despite them as well.

Wendy's dual existence as child and mother is *Peter Pan*'s central conflict. It is what forces Wendy out of the nursery and into Neverland and what draws her back to reality once make-believe grows too overwhelming. As Christine Roth explains in her article, "Babes in Boy-Land: J.M. Barrie and the Edwardian Girl," "the child and mother [become] contending sides of the same girl figure. Neither side can complete the formula without the other: if they are isolated, the girl-child becomes distant, and the girl-woman becomes fallen and utterly forgettable" (49). Wendy is able to "bore her way in" because she rigidly juxtaposes Peter's inherent flexibility. Roth argues that while Peter "is completely polymorphous," Wendy and the novel's other female characters "remain



incarnations of two extremes between which Barrie constantly negotiates Peter's paradoxical boy/man image" (63). In short, the women are either whorish like Tinker Bell or icy like Wendy. So while Peter's liminal existence allows him to flirt with adulthood as a facet of make-believe while still remaining childish for as long as he wishes, Wendy must choose between the two. Peter's happiness comes from testing boundaries. Over the course of the novel, Wendy discovers hers comes from crossing them. She knows she cannot be both child and adult at once, and ultimately she chooses the latter. Both Barrie and his narrator use Wendy's internal conflict as a mirror upon which to reflect Peter's stubborn contradictions. He enjoys playing house, but he will not grow up. Peter asks Wendy in reference to the game, "It is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their father?" (Barrie 145). Although she helps him distinguish the two, the necessity of doing so means "the iconic boy begins to find his place in England's cultish obsession with the paradoxical duality of children's physical, mental, and social character" (Roth 63), while Wendy stands aside despite the fact that her conflict influences the story's plot.

Wendy flies to Neverland because it interests her and she leaves as soon as it stops. While in Neverland, she battles foes far more personal than physical, and ultimately decides her desire to grow up outweighs her desire to play pretend. Unlike Peter, Wendy has few issues distinguishing reality from make-believe, and therefore she cannot continually inhabit two roles at once. Unlike Peter, who personifies contradiction to the extent that he will "suddenly change sides" if a fight bores him (Barrie 111), Wendy wants unity in her prescribed roles. Roth's explanation for this is that "The girl figure is always part woman and part child, which, for Barrie, means that she is never completely a child...a character's role, not age, dictates who is a child and who is an adult in Neverland" (54). By Roth's analysis, Wendy is not meant for Neverland. But Wendy's determination to at least attempt balancing reality and pretend is better celebrated than mocked.

Although Peter and his games charm her, they do not control her. Peter's whims have little influence over Wendy's choices, and when he *does* force her into certain scenarios, he often only does so to preserve his own pride or image of fairness. When the two are stranded atop Marooner's Rock, for example, having just escaped a fight amongst pirates and Lost Boys in the Mermaid's Lagoon, they face the difficult decision of choosing who should be allowed to find safety while the other stays behind to almost certainly drown. Peter, wounded, cannot fly or swim; Wendy, tired from swimming throughout the battle, cannot make it ashore on her own to find help. It is not until "something brushed against Peter as light as a kiss, and stayed there, as if saying timidly, 'Can I be of any use?'" (Barrie 131) that they discover an old kite of Michael's which might carry one of them to safety. Wendy is just as interested in justice as Peter, if not more so. She suggests drawing lots to decide who will take the kite away from the rock, but Peter refuses, citing chivalry by saying, "And you a lady; never" (Barrie 131). However, while male characters consistently undermine Wendy's thoughts, ideas, and plans, she continues making them. The narrator himself admits Wendy saves the boys' lives at least once (Barrie 112) and admirably defies Hook; only Peter's bravado consistently outshines her resourcefulness. Wendy creates her own brand of bravery, boring her way into a story that cares little for her even as she writes her own chapters into it.

Examining Wendy's reasons for journeying to and eventually abandoning Neverland necessitates acknowledging her as the author of her own story, as well as the context in which she writes her part. As Martha Stoddard Holmes acknowledges in "*Peter Pan* and the Possibilities of Child Literature," *Peter Pan*'s presence as a defining text in children's literature does not imply it is a book read primarily by children (132). Katherine Jones provides a broader definition of "children's literature" as "'a literature written almost entirely by adults that assumes various conceptions of the child, childhood, and the childlike,

with child readers usually being the target of the book” (Jones qtd. in Holmes 134). This is the whole of *Peter Pan*: an adult’s version of childhood, driven by fantasy far more than memory (Holmes 135). Wendy’s story, then, is the child’s fantasy of adulthood. Understanding *Peter Pan* requires an understanding of this distinction, particularly when one intends to examine Wendy as an embodiment of the latter. The sort of people who read *Peter Pan* today are generally adults, and they may choose whether to approach the text from what Robert Pippin would call a “naïve” perspective, or a more critical, analytical one. The naïve audience reads for the sake of reading. They pursue wonder for wonder’s sake, and take texts at face value because “Clearly, poems and novels and paintings were not produced as objects for future academic study” (Pippin). A naïve reading of Barrie’s novel would contend that Wendy goes to Neverland in search of romance and leaves because she encounters rejection. The naïve reader would argue that Wendy follows Peter to Neverland, rather than tempts him to take her there, because of her schoolgirl crush; she “made herself rather cheap” in hopes of a kiss (Barrie 41). The narrator thrives on such naïve, uncritical readings because they align almost perfectly with the Wendy he hopes his audience will consume. Audiences unwilling to look past the “aesthetic experience” of reading “that is by its nature resistant to restatement in more formalized, theoretical or generalizing language” (Pippin) risk seeing Wendy as flat and single-minded, focused only on an idealized domesticity: a bore. Critical readers see Wendy’s interest in the imaginary takes precedence over her interest in any particular boy. She leaves her nursery for Neverland not because Peter tempts her with a kiss, but because he mentions his love for her stories. Wendy goes with him and so leaves a place where she has no authority—the nursery—to fashion a new, albeit temporary, life somewhere she has worth: as a mother in Neverland.

The longing for maternal relationships drives most of the action in *Peter Pan*. Every character from Slightly the Lost Boy to Captain Hook has some story

or strong feeling about mothers, most of them pleasant or wistful. For instance, when Wendy first meets the Lost Boys they “all went on their knees, and holding out their arms cried, ‘O Wendy lady, be our mother’” (Barrie 101). Peter is the only character to look down upon mothers completely. However, even as he implies some good feeling for them when he describes his “exact feelings” toward Wendy as “those of a devoted son” (Barrie 145), he traps her in the maternal role she travels to Neverland to find. Wendy’s relationship with motherhood is the story’s most complex. As M. Joy Morse points out, Wendy lives in a London where “The perceptive middle-class wife and mother could not help but intuit her inability to meet the standards of sexlessness and submission set before her” (285). In Morse’s view of *Peter Pan*’s London, Wendy’s roles are only chosen insofar as they are already instinctual. Wendy, then, leaves Neverland not only because she begins to lose interest in it, but also because she acknowledges her inability to properly imitate the roles of wife and mother as outlined by Mrs. Darling. In many ways, Wendy refuses to give up her own childhood spirit in favor of the maternal and wifely submissiveness displayed by her mother. The narrator reveals, “Mr. Darling used to boast to Wendy that her mother not only loved him but respected him” (Barrie 8), but Wendy shows little indication of ever respecting Peter. In fact, she frequently orders him about. Wendy calls Peter her “little man,” and at one point during their first meeting labels his forwardness undesirable when “she told him with spirit that he was not captain in her house” (Barrie 46). Wendy leaves the nursery to pursue motherhood, but returns when she realizes her desire to be *a* mother does not outweigh her wish to *be* mothered. In the childish world of *Peter Pan*, maternal instinct implies an almost sexual desirability. However, Wendy’s nursery window first draws Peter not because he feels any attraction toward Wendy, but because of his love for her mother’s stories (Barrie 47). At the end of the story, Peter returns to Neverland with nothing from Wendy, but “He took Mrs. Darling’s kiss with him. The kiss that

had been for no one else Peter took quite easily” (Barrie 231). That Peter “took” the kiss implies he owns it, that it was waiting for him to come and collect it. Wendy eventually grows up to have a daughter of her own, a fact so celebrated the narrator says it “ought not to be written in ink but in a golden splash” (Barrie 234); finally, she occupies in reality the role she plays in Neverland. Wendy tells stories to her own daughter, Jane, and one day Peter returns to the nursery.

It is not because Wendy was once a child that she maintains a connection with Peter; if that were true, none of the Lost Boys who become “grown up and done for” (Barrie 234) would forget him so completely. Rather, Wendy’s maternal relationships keep Peter close to her. As she grows up and assumes real maternal responsibility, she leaves behind what she has spent the past two-hundred-odd pages representing, what Morse labels “the potential of future maternal power” (297). Morse further argues that Wendy represents a kind of temptation to Peter, who brings her to Neverland and “creates the possibility of attaining the maternal bond for which he longs, but free of adult sexuality” (297). However, this interpretation undermines Wendy’s own relationship with motherhood. It implies Peter’s desire to be loved maternally is somehow more important than Wendy’s confused wish to love him both as a husband and a son, and it ignores the fact that no one coaxes her to Neverland, that she instead consents to visit. Jonathan Padley offers a more sophisticated interpretation of the foggy relationship between Wendy and motherhood in his article, “Peter Pan: Indefinition Defined.” He argues, “It is because Peter innately destabilizes Wendy’s character into the roles of child, mother, and parental partner, and because Wendy temporarily operates successfully in this mixed-mode capacity, that she so intimately menaces and almost undoes him” (284). In other words, Wendy’s momentarily liminal position in Neverland as a child both content with present make-believe and hopeful for the real future, unseats Peter insofar as that he cannot reconcile the two wishes. Although Peter inhabits a contrary space full

of forgetfulness and pretend, his position is solitary. No one else is meant to be more than one thing at once. Peter wants Wendy to be many things to him, but he also wants her to make-believe them all. Pretending to be three things at once is impossible and Wendy cannot indefinitely occupy all the roles Peter wishes of her. Doing so requires a sacrifice of reality, which Wendy has already shown to be impossible if she wishes to maintain her sense of self. In her return to London, she places herself and her reality above Peter's pretend. As Padley argues, "For her, the demand of Peter's indefiniteness—that she make herself comparably indefinite in order to combine the roles of child peer, mother, parental partner, and perhaps even lover—is impossible" (282-283). Padley argues that Peter wants Wendy to become so flexible she distorts herself unrecognizably. In other words, Peter wants a Wendy who *acts* like everything he wants—"child peer, mother, parental partner, and perhaps even lover"—but not one who actually *is* any of those things. The Wendy Peter wants does not—and cannot—exist. Although her time in Neverland implies an attempt to submit to Peter's wishes, Wendy ultimately chooses real childhood and the promise of age over Peter's make-believe mix of both. Wendy's complex but firm relationship with motherhood allows her to face Peter directly, and to ultimately remember him while she grows up even as the other children forget him. Just as Wendy's mother told stories, Wendy tells stories to her daughter, Jane (Barrie 235-236), who will one day tell these same stories to Peter Pan, and so motherhood keeps the eternal boy present and alive.

During her time in Neverland, Wendy's most motherly actions have little to do with actual care for the Lost Boys she tends (save perhaps her brothers, John and Michael), and more to do with the desire to continue writing her own narrative. Wendy creates her own corner of Peter's world from the moment she arrives. When the Lost Boys offer to make her a house, she "rather greedily" orders it done "With windows peeping in, you know, / And babies peeping out"

(Barrie 98). Because she asks sweetly and the Boys (including Peter) want a mother, she gets exactly what she wants. Wendy is slow to anger because she realizes fights do her little good. Living in a boys' world, her best strategy to reach her goals is to act as though she already knows what is best and make everyone else feel foolish for not playing along from the beginning. The approach is remarkably similar to Peter's. Although the Lost Boys serve Peter because he make-believes everything he knows, they obey Wendy because "she is only a girl" (Barrie 95). Her status as something less than they, implied by the use of "only," also gives her authority over the boys. She is unique in her apparent softness. Her gender bars her from fighting pirates and Neverland's other filthy games, but Wendy uses this so-called limitation to her advantage and does what Peter cannot: she tells stories. As Clark argues, "Wendy manipulates the duties of her maternal role...in order to gain control of her situation" (307). Her stories reinforce her status as a mother, although they are not so much fairy tales as lists of details about her own parents' lives back in London (Barrie 150). To the Lost Boys who have spent years in Neverland, however, her tales are fantastic and new. In telling them, Wendy cultivates within the Lost Boys a respect for reality that ultimately undermines their agreement to follow Peter. She understands make-believe just as well as Peter does, if not better. Wendy's ultimate advantage lies in realizing reality can be just as enticing as the pretend.

### **Wendy's Memory**

While Peter's belief in the make-believe, and by extension his forgetfulness, allow him "ecstasies innumerable," Wendy's fixation on the physical give her love, "the one joy from which [Peter] must be for ever barred" (Barrie 225). Comparing the two is some ways impossible. While Peter gets adventure, Wendy gets stability. Peter experiences constant joy, while Wendy feels a mix of anger,

grief, and frustration Peter can only grasp at. From the naïve reader's perspective, Peter's existence may be the more peaceful one; he forgets sadness as soon as he experiences it, and so he seems immune to hardship. Yet, because of this immunity and forgetfulness, Peter's life is insincere. Wendy brings her memory to the Neverland and finds truth there that Peter in his cyclical state can never reach; in order to be true, one must remember, and in order to remember, one must grow up.

In a world run by a boy who forgets everything from when to eat to the names of the people he kills, Wendy's memory is her greatest ally. In keeping her mind stable with memories of home, she also keeps her identity among the indefinite. Wendy recognizes Peter's forgetfulness during the flight to Neverland (Barrie 60) and although she often plays along with his make-believe games, she also takes time to contemplate the effects of the Neverland on her psyche. The island is forgetfulness itself; life remains stagnant there because its inhabitants cannot comprehend change. Wendy combats the subtle threat of the island by quizzing her brothers and the Lost Boys on seemingly trivial details of the Darlings' lives in London. She is not perfect, however. As the narrator points out, "By the way, the questions were all written in the past tense...Wendy, you see, had been forgetting, too" (Barrie 110). Neverland is so personified throughout the text, it seems the island itself pulls any sense of reality out of its inhabitants. By the time she distributes these quizzes, Wendy has presumably been on the island for quite some time, although, "it is quite impossible to say how time does wear on in the Neverland, where it is calculated by moons and suns, and there are ever so many more of them than on the mainland" (Barrie 108). In this way, the island is a kind of prison, trapping everyone on it in the dizzying, roundabout tumult of Peter's position as an eternal youth. The implication is that if Wendy forgets her parents, she can stay on the island forever. She fervently fights this option. When Wendy realizes her forgetfulness, Emily Clark argues that she "recuperates her



efficacy and individual identity by asserting her ability to terminate her performance in Neverland and return to the Nursery” (307). Clark labels Wendy “the gatekeeper to ‘reality’ in Neverland” (307). Peter, then, guards the pretend. Although they co-exist for much of the text, Wendy and Peter are fundamentally at odds. Unlike the novel’s other characters, however, Wendy recognizes both her forgetfulness and her opposition to Peter’s desires, and these realizations allow her to leave the Neverland. Without her fading memories of London and her parents, the island could trap her indefinitely.

Although Wendy leaves her home in London because of the temptation to forget childhood in favor of playing at being grown up, she returns to her parents and their nursery because of reality’s pull. In the chapter titled “Wendy’s Story,” she convinces her brothers and the Lost Boys to abandon Neverland in favor of London, citing an adult future and “faith in a mother’s love” as the two chief defenses of reality (Barrie 152). Wendy knows Peter’s pretend is not a foundation enough to live on; a person can only eat so many make-believe meals before she starves. Although it is easy to read her return to reality as a sort of failure, this is naïve in the same way it is naïve to read Peter as the sun next to which all other characters become flat shadows. Peter does not evict Wendy from the Neverland any more than he drags her there at the story’s beginning. She flies from the nursery because she wants to, because she chooses it. To readers she might be seen as the temptress, coaxing her brothers and the Lost Boys home with her in the same way she originally convinces Peter to take her to Neverland. Peter is the only child who opts to stay behind in Neverland. Wendy tries ordering him to leave with her as a mother might order a petulant child, but her pretend power over him collapses the moment she ceases to believe in it, as do all powers associated with Neverland (Barrie 232). Peter allows the children to leave but refuses to join them in their new, linear lives. They will go to school, and then an office, and soon they will be grown, and he will go back to Neverland and forget

everything about them in order to stay young (Barrie 229-233). Peter might even return Neverland to have all the same adventures over and over again, without ever knowing the difference. Meanwhile, John will grow up to be “the bearded man who doesn’t know any story to tell his children” (Barrie 334). Wendy is the only character allowed small pieces of both existences. Peter leaves the Darling house in London with a promise to return for Wendy every year so she might spend a week with him spring cleaning in the Neverland, but the promise breaks after just two returns (Barrie 234). He forgets her for decades. Wendy grows up, as do her brothers and the Lost Boys, but only she remembers their adventures in Neverland. Although Peter becomes “no more to her than a little dust in the box in which she had kept her toys” (Barrie 233-234), he remains in her memory, waiting for the chance to let the cycle continue all over again. While in Neverland, Wendy cannot forget home, and when she returns home, she cannot forget Neverland. It is not that she exists between the two worlds, because Wendy is “the kind that likes to grow up” (Barrie 234), a firm product of reality. Rather, she owns her contradictory experiences by compartmentalizing them; when in Neverland she maintains a respect for home, and while at home she keeps within her a fondness for Neverland.

Despite her abandonment of youth, Wendy’s return from the Neverland is not a symbol of failure. After all, by the end of the text, any longing one may have felt for Peter’s seemingly charmed existence ought to have been quelled by the reveal of his countless small tragedies. When Wendy grows up, the narrator says, “You need not be sorry for her” (Barrie 234), as though that were ever an option. Her return paired with her recollection calls for something far greater than pity. Wendy should be celebrated. In the article, “Closure in Children’s Fantasy Fiction,” Sarah Gilead states, “though the Darling children and the Lost Boys are ‘found’ again by the powerful social realities and narrative conventions that appear to triumph at the end, the return does not bring stability but, rather,

generates further losses and returns” (287). Gilead argues for the children’s return to the nursery and thereafter the forgetfulness of Neverland, as a failure in relation to the overall story. However, this reading forgets Wendy’s unique function as “gatekeeper” (Clark 307). Of all the characters in *Peter Pan*, Wendy gets special permission to not only remember but also believe in every one of her adventures, both in Neverland and the mainland. Her return to the nursery *does* bring stability because it allows her to “[grow] up of her own free will a day quicker than the other girls” (Barrie 234) and memorialize Neverland by telling stories with her own family. Wendy’s relationship with Peter and Neverland upon her return to the mainland is a complex pairing of wistful nostalgia and willful forward motion. She wants to grow up while also maintaining a close relationship with Peter and therefore the world of pretend, and it is only after Peter abandons her that she realizes this is not possible. *Peter Pan* ends with the statement, “and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless” (Barrie 242), referring to the pattern Peter builds with Wendy’s female descendants, bringing each to the Neverland in turn until, presumably, the end of time. As Gilead notes, “We glimpse the generations come and go (Wendy’s, Jane’s, Margaret’s); and while Peter, as the resistant impulse, accompanies them, his unchanging presence only emphasizes and seems somehow to hasten the speed of generational process” (287). She argues the masculinity of Peter as a “resistant impulse” contrary to the Darling women’s constant aging only enhances their maturation. Peter’s cyclical nature makes linear time move faster.

In embodying timelessness, Peter Pan also personifies forgetfulness, as “the riddle of his existence” (Barrie 174) is timeless precisely because he forgets everything. When he returns with Wendy to the Neverland for the next year’s spring cleaning, they share the following exchange:

She had looked forward to thrilling talks with him about old times, but new adventures had crowded the old ones from his mind.

“Who is Captain Hook?” he asked with interest when she spoke of the arch enemy.

“Don’t you remember,” she asked, amazed, “how you killed him and saved all our lives?”

“I forget them after I kill them,” he replied carelessly.

When she expressed a doubtful hope that Tinker Bell would be glad to see her he said, “Who is Tinker Bell?”

“O Peter,” she said, shocked; but even when she explained he could not remember.

“There are such a lot of them,” he said, “I expect she is no more.”  
(Barrie 232-233)

The entire exchange is haunting because of Peter’s innocence when confronted with his own monstrosity. However, Peter’s question of “Who is Tinker Bell?” (Barrie 232) most clearly illustrates the shifting, shadowed nature of Peter’s being. That he forgets Hook is surprising, if not entirely unexpected. It might be chalked up to an example of his cockiness, that he finds himself so far above his enemies he gives them no thought after he defeats them. The forgetting of Tinker Bell, however, implies a deliberate cruelty previously unseen in Peter. For the sake of staying young, he is willing to forget his closest friends. Earlier in the book, Tinker Bell sacrifices herself for Peter and he begs all the children in the world to help him save her (Barrie 179-180). She lives then, but one must wonder what finally makes her “no more” (Barrie 233), if her death is the result of yet another sacrifice for a boy who cannot be bothered to remember her name. That Wendy remembers not just Tinker Bell but all the adventures she has with Peter does not imply she lives in the past. Rather, as Sarah McCarroll notes, “The clear implication is that Peter’s eternal youth is actually a kind of death, to be envied for its preservation of innocence, but regarded as tragic for the lost potential adulthood denied by (and denied to) this archetypal boy who wouldn’t grow up”

(McCarroll 34). While Peter lives endlessly by endlessly forgetting, he also continually dies. He cannot remember as Wendy can because he rejects linear time and its implicit forward motion, but he cannot stay perfectly still, either, or suspend himself in one moment. Instead, while Wendy and other children make mistakes and hope not to repeat them, Peter is doomed to a life of perpetual loss, and its greatest tragedy is his inability to comprehend what he might be missing.

Peter Pan has “ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know” (Barrie 225), but they come at the cost of his memory. Nightmares accompany his forgetfulness, and “it had been Wendy’s custom to take him out of bed and sit with him on her lap, soothing him in dear ways of her own invention” (Barrie 174). Wendy cuddles Peter through his forgetting, and the implication that he should never know of Wendy’s “soothing” him—she puts him back to bed before he wakes, and never mentions the dreams come morning (Barrie 174)—implies a masculinization of forgetfulness. Wendy cannot mention Peter’s dreams to him because they are more than likely manifestations of his most painful memories. She also cannot speak of the nightmares because mentioning them acknowledges Peter’s weaknesses, and the fact that he must be held steady by a makeshift mother to weather the storm of his repressed emotions. There are no lasting relationships with Peter Pan himself, only with one’s memories of him. He remembers Wendy enough to visit her after decades, but of course she is “ever so much more than twenty” (Barrie 240) by then, and to him it seems no time should have passed at all. So he takes Wendy’s daughter to Neverland instead. Wendy lets them go. Years later, Wendy’s granddaughter will travel to Neverland in much the same way, and then her great-granddaughter, “and thus it will go on” (Barrie 242), but at the center of it will always be Wendy’s first adventure and the memories she shares with her daughter, Jane. None of the novel’s other characters retain this sort of relationship with Peter; he forgets everyone from Tinker Bell to Slightly, and they in turn forget him. Michael remembers and believes a bit longer

than the rest of the boys—they forget Peter within a year—but he never again returns to Neverland (Barrie 232). Neverland is a place that can only be shared with those who remember it, and the only people who remember it are Wendy and her daughters. Wendy’s memory keeps Peter alive above all else as she and her descendants bore their way into his world again and again and again, endlessly proving Wendy to be the true hero of this neverending story. Next to Wendy Darling, Peter Pan is nothing but a shadow.

### **Wendy’s Afterlife**

*Peter Pan* has a long and celebrated afterlife in popular culture. There are countless adaptations of Barrie’s original story across all forms of media, and the novel’s titular character appears in relation to all sorts of merchandise, from peanut butter to shirt collars. Barrie’s story single-handedly popularized the name “Wendy.” Every year, countless elementary schools and community theatres across the world perform Barrie’s original play, and hundreds more artists perform adaptations such as Rick Elice’s Tony Award-winning *Peter and the Starcatcher*, or Ella Hickson’s *Wendy & Peter Pan*. A recent article on “The 10 Best Peter Pan Adaptations” sites no fewer than five adaptations sanctioned by Walt Disney Studios as some of the best of all time (TeamEpicReads). The only non-Disney film to appear on the list is P.J. Hogan’s popular 2003 live action adaptation of Barrie’s novel. There have been films and books and Broadway musicals produced about not only Barrie’s novel, but also his writing process and inspiration for the story. Over the past century the story of Peter and Wendy has proven to be as timeless as Peter Pan himself, shifting and adapting to best suit the culture around it. What this means, of course, is that Wendy Darling is as rooted in the Western cultural canon as other famous children’s heroines such as Alice, Dorothy, and even Cinderella.

All of this popularity, of course, makes an impartial reading of Wendy nearly impossible. A twenty-first century reader views Wendy not as *only* a character in Barrie's novel, but also as the subject of the countless adaptations created since the text's 1911 publication, many of which are inarguably more popular than the original text. Today, *Peter Pan* is viewed as a children's story, but not necessarily a children's book, for as Martha Stoddard Holmes says, "While *Peter Pan*'s iconic status is regularly connected to its position as a classic work of 'children's literature,' it is unclear how many children actually read it...If children no longer read a text apparently written with them as the imagined audience, is the text still 'their' literature?" (132). *Peter Pan* is nothing short of a Western cultural phenomenon, but its current audience consists of both children and adults. More adults than children read the original text, but adults are often led to it by children's adaptations. Walt Disney's 1953 version of the story gives Peter his green clothes and Wendy her walk off the plank, two bits of the story's modern mythos so famous they have been reproduced in many adaptations since, despite their lack of fidelity. Because of the story's solid presence in Western and particularly American culture, readers cannot approach Barrie's Wendy without prior judgments or ideas about the character, and especially without basing these ideas off of Disney's film. Wendy introduces herself to modern readers already formed by outsiders' interpretations. Peter is in many ways no different, although the stagnant nature of his character means his reiterations have changed little throughout the years. He is the very definition of a boy who does not change. Although Disney's adaptation sparked an increase in his masculinity (before the Disney film, Peter was traditionally played onstage by a woman), Peter is almost always small, a little elfish, a little androgynous, and incredibly cocky. Wendy's character, on the other hand, has shifted considerably in adaptations over the years.

The text of Barrie's play was not published until 1928, twenty-four years after its premiere at London's Duke of York Theatre and seventeen years after the publication of *Peter and Wendy*. Since there are no recordings of the original production, in many ways Barrie's novel serves as Wendy's original appearance, as it was the first mass-produced iteration of the text. The most well-known Wendy is Disney's: demure, voiced by Kathryn Beaumont, and dressed entirely in blue. This Wendy hovers somewhere around eleven years old: young enough to have a crush, but not old enough to know how to act on it. She embodies the themes of innocence enhanced by Disney's version, and her attitude towards Peter flips throughout the film between doe-eyed admiration and petulant pouting. In his 1953 review of the film, critic Bosley Crowther calls her unoriginal, a "well-bred...virtual duplicate of the prim Snow White." Disney's Wendy momentarily agrees with Peter's sentiment that "Girls talk too much" as she sews on his shadow, and her admonishment of his cockiness is entirely cut from the scene. This Wendy is innocent and doll-like and, according to Martin Green, "a monster of priggishness" (26). Disney stifles the spark of Barrie's Wendy because she most closely embodies Christine Roth's analysis, occupying only one role at a time throughout her story (59). She is either child or mother. The tension Barrie's Wendy feels due to the pull of both these roles, the battle between the real and the pretend, are never mentioned. Instead Disney flattens Wendy into a two-dimensional version of herself, rendered inconsequential in a version of the story content to brush off not just Wendy, but all girls. In Disney's version, Wendy goes to Neverland because Peter cannot stand the thought of her having to grow up, not because she sees Neverland as a place where she and her stories have worth. It is possible that the narrative of Peter as a tempter starts here, only to grow so large over time that it obscures that fundamental truth of Barrie's story: "There can be no denying that it was she who first tempted him" (Barrie 47). Wendy's foundation is ambition. In Barrie's story, she wants to go to Neverland



even more than Peter wants to bring her there; she tempts him because she has control, and because it suits her.

This naïve reading of Wendy as a doe-eyed victim with a crush is only perpetuated by P.J. Hogan's 2003 film, also titled *Peter Pan*. Peter and Wendy perch on the edge of adolescence in this film, and Hogan takes full advantage of their ages' romantic potential. Hogan's version of the story emphasizes hints of romance hidden in Barrie's text. Sexual emergency and maturity feature prominently in the film, about which Roger Ebert argues, "to never grow up is unspeakably sad, and this is the first 'Peter Pan' where Peter's final flight seems not like a victory but an escape." Hogan's tone is more complex than in past iterations, and his film does not shy away from complicated pre-adolescent emotion or sadness. Peter and Wendy flirt constantly throughout the film, and Peter only defeats Hook after Wendy kisses him on the lips, the power of young love presumably giving him the strength to beat the pirate. Hogan's film's twenty-first century feminist twists make Wendy the story's hero. Before her kiss, Peter faces certain death by Hook's hand. What's more, Wendy battles pirates throughout Peter's entire fight with Hook, in contrast to both Disney's Wendy and Barrie's, who "of course, had stood by taking no part in the fight, though watching Peter with glistening eyes" (Barrie 209). Although unrequited love may motivate Hogan's Wendy more than previous iterations, she learns more than how to darn socks and make-believe cooking a stew. She learns to fight and to fly, and spends much of the film trying to remind Peter there is "so much more." Hogan's Wendy is multifaceted, like Barrie's. She cannot be many things at once, but she would like to, and this struggle propels her through the story.

In Hogan's film, Wendy *is* the narrator. She tells her story on her own terms, speaking as an adult looking back on a fondly remembered childhood adventure. Although there is no scene in which Peter returns to bring her daughter to Neverland, Wendy makes it clear she will "tell his story to my children, who

will tell it to their children, and so it will go on.” Wendy’s memory, then, remains an important and defining part of her character. Disney’s film, in contrast, opens with a male narrator’s assurance that “All of this has happened before, and it will all happen again.” Disney takes full advantage of the self-proclaimed omniscience of Barrie’s narrator. In a sharp contrast and vibrant feminist move, the 2003 film does away with Barrie’s judgmental third-party narrator and opts instead to allow Wendy to tell her own story, the implication being that no one else can do it better. Hogan’s Wendy is both an adaptation of and a response to Barrie’s. She is what happens when a forcibly distant narrator abandons the scene in favor of character integrity. Hogan recognizes Wendy’s potential and harnesses it more freely than Disney. Hogan’s Wendy owns her stories and strength; both Disney’s and Barrie’s are funneled through someone else.

And yet, the Disney and Hogan Wendys are not the only modern iterations well-known enough to color the pages of Barrie’s book. Steven Spielberg’s *Hook* hosts Granny Wendy, who is Wendy Darling grown up twice over, so old her adventures with Peter were turned into a book years ago. In Dave Berry and Ridley Pearson’s popular prequel book series, *Peter and the Starcatchers*, “Molly” implicitly occupies the space of the first “Wendy.” She teaches Peter about the magical world hidden around him. They share an adventure but at the end of the novel she leaves to return home, choosing reality over his new life on the island that will become Neverland. Because of the adaptations that began almost immediately after Barrie’s play was first produced (he himself wrote a screenplay for a potential film adaptation of the story), the idea of a “traditional” reading of Wendy is difficult to contemplate. This loose canonical structure as well as Barrie’s own interventions and adaptations makes flexible interpretations of Wendy not only possible, but expected, even when examining her within Barrie’s novel alone. Despite her fluctuating personality throughout the past century’s adaptations of her story, several character traits remain fundamental to a

critical reading of her character: Wendy is storyteller; she has motherly instincts; she goes to the Neverland of her own free will; she cannot decide if she wants to grow up, and on the night she leaves with Peter she balances her competing desires more perilously than ever. Wendy's personality has shifted over the years, and these shifts allow space to engage with all her rich character when examining Barrie's novel today. In many ways, Wendy can be flexible today because artists have been flexible with her in the past. Although somewhat trapped by her continuous pop cultural position as second-tier to Peter, this century's worth of sliding under much critical and artistic scrutiny allows Wendy space to grow and flourish from the root of *Peter Pan*'s "textual history" (White and Tarr viii).

## **Conclusion**

Wendy both guides readers into Peter's world and when they leave, she reassures them that growing up does not mean saying goodbye to Neverland forever. For Wendy, childhood is something to be cherished and remembered, not forgotten. She enlivens Peter's narrative through her storytelling, and in doing so she encourages readers to keep her own story alive in turn. The result of this is Peter's central position in the modern narrative; Wendy, over the years, has been forgotten. Peter's promise of youthful freedom captivates audiences, yet Barrie's *Peter Pan* centers on the complexity of growing up far more than childhood's simplistic joys. Wendy's central position in Barrie's original narrative proves this. She opens Barrie's novel with the knowledge of adulthood's inevitability and closes it with the hope that "thus it will go on" (Barrie 242), that childhood will continue to be magical and adventurous for all children who might meet Peter, but also that these children will one day grow up themselves. She also hopes that when they do, they will understand the importance of aging and of telling stories to their children in turn. These stories and their media will shift, but their message

will remain the same: Peter Pan is a boy who cannot grow up, but Wendy Darling, like all children, must.

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